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SUBJECT: JERUSALEM MEDIA REACTION (12/21): Prisoner exchange deal
could be imminent

Main Stories:

The three dailies run front page coverage on today's Israeli cabinet meeting to discuss the prisoner exchange deal with Hamas. Independent daily Al-Quds cites Israeli TV saying that the ball is in Israel's court now regarding the deal, noting that the next hours will be decisive.

The three dailies also front page news on Palestinian Authority (PA) Prime Minister Salam Fayyad's visit to Bethlehem yesterday to inaugurate several development projects. Prime Minister Fayyad is quoted in the dailies reiterating the importance of pursuing state building measures to create new facts on the ground.

Al-Quds runs an article citing Israeli government sources revealing news on a new US plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The coverage notes that the US realizes its mistake of focusing on permanent solutions with high expectations, and will now work towards temporary solutions. The proposed plan calls for allowing the PA to have full control over 60% of the West Bank, according to coverage.

Citing the PA official news agency Wafa, Al-Quds front pages news on PA President Mahmoud Abbas' interview with Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, published yesterday. Abbas noted that he decided not to run for re-election because he realized that the peace process reached a dead end.

In related news, the dailies report that Secretary Clinton telephoned President Abbas yesterday to discuss peace efforts and the latest developments in the region.

Weekend stories:

Sunday, December 20:

Al Ayyam runs front page coverage of Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) Chief Negotiator Saeb Erekat confirming that the PA is working towards asking the UN Security Council to declare the borders of a Palestine state. The PA is also going to ask the International Court of Justice to issue a decision regarding the Israeli occupation of Palestinian Territories of 1967, and requesting that Switzerland implement the Fourth Geneva Convention regarding protection of civilians during times of war. Erekat told WAFA agency, "We are working on several fronts to end the occupation."

Al Ayyam and Al-Hayat Al-Jadida run front page stories on an Egyptian security source stating that Egypt is strengthening and reinforcing security measures on its borders with the Gaza Strip after drilling equipment used to build the proposed underground steel wall came under Palestinian fire for three days in a row. The source added that Egypt deployed 300 policemen and intensified patrols along the borders and in areas of drilling. The source told Reuters "we sent new police forces to the borders with Gaza following repeated shooting incidents from the Palestinian side."

Al Quds and Al Ayyam run front page stories on former President Jimmy Carter calling on the international community to end the suffering of Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip. In an article published by The Guardian yesterday, President Carter discussed the deterioration of the peace process between the Palestinians and the Israelis, noting that the peace process is almost dead. President Carter also pointed to Israel's continued settlement expansion and

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the PLO leaders' refusal to join renewed peace talks without a settlement freeze as obstacles. President Carter added that the U.S. has impeded Egyptian efforts to resolve differences between Hamas and Fatah that could have lead to elections next year. Carter noted, "Despite offers by Palestinian leaders and humanitarian organizations to guarantee that imported materials will not be used for military purposes, cement, wood, and panes of glass are not permitted to pass into Gaza. The US and other nations have accepted this situation without forceful corrective action."

Saturday, December 19:

Al Quds carries front page news on an Egyptian diplomatic source telling Saudi newspaper Al Watan that Israel will provide Cairo with its response to the prisoners' exchange deal within the next 48 hours. The source stated that the current disagreement between Israel and Hamas revolves around 50 people Hamas wants released from Israeli jails, including Fatah leader Marwan Al Barghouthi. Reports note that under the terms of the deal, Israel will release approximately 1400 Palestinian prisoners in return for the release of kidnapped Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. The source also stated that 150 of the released Palestinian prisoners will be expelled to the Gaza Strip or outside the Palestinian Territories.

Al Quds runs a front page story quoting Israeli sources stating that Prime Minister Netanyahu appointed a coordinator to help the government, the Jerusalem Municipality and the Israeli Ministry of Interior to accelerate the demolition of more than 7,000 Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem under the pretext of fighting unlicensed construction activities. According to Israeli sources, the Municipality has identified Silwan (Al Bustan area in particular) as a priority for implementing this plan.

The three dailies run front page stories on two teenage brothers and a journalist who were hospitalized after sustaining injuries Friday during an attack carried out by a group of Israeli settlers against a family in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood in East Jerusalem. Local sources reported that a group of settlers attacked the home of the Attayeh family, who live near the recently seized home of the Al Ghawi family. Nuha Attayeh said that settlers attacked them while they were inside their home and condemned the fact that Israeli police forces did nothing to prevent the attack that was unfolding in front of them.

BLOCK QUOTE:

Wahid Abdel Majid writing in Al-Quds under the title "Barak Obama after Receiving the Nobel Prize - Peace or War?" raises questions about whether or not President Obama deserved to win the Nobel Peace Prize. The writer discusses two arguments. The first criticizes Obama for accepting the prize despite few, if any, achievements, while the second argues that Obama contributed to promoting change and dialogue among nations, and therefore deserved it.

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